

Proposal to Implement a Peer Mentorship Program Project

A Senior Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department

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Bachelor of Science

By

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Introduction

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo's College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Science (CAFES) needs a peer mentor program modeled after the Orfalea College of Business' (OCOB). Younger students who have mentors do exponentially better than students who do not. Upperclassmen gain a sense of fulfillment from helping younger, less experienced underclassmen. Rodger's research provides insight into students' academic success when paired with a peer mentor. Those who participated in a full year of peer mentoring had considerably higher grades than the control group. A specific group of students who benefit from programs like these are students who struggle with anxiety. Studies show that students with anxiety also did significantly better when having a peer mentor compared to the control group that had fear without a peer mentor (Rodger, 1987).

Agricultural science students who don't follow the teaching route often have issues with getting involved in their major. This type of program would give them an avenue to meet fellow peers, giving them a connection within their major as well as something to get involved in. Collings' study shows students who participated in the peer mentor program got more involved in their college campus. Four times as many students who did not partake in the peer mentor program decided to leave the university. These results showed the peer mentor program had moderate effects on student retention and helped the transition to college (Collings, 2014). The best leadership style has been implemented in OCOB's peer mentor program, which is the model the authors will use. This project will implement the OCOB peer mentor program within CAFES. The initial phase of this project begins the mentor program within the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, specifically with the Agricultural Leadership Society student club. The more students interact with each other, the better they succeed academically and personally (Chickering, 1987).

Background

Either a graduate student or an academic advisor will head this program and train twelve upperclassmen to be student leaders. OCOB has twelve students who meet weekly to plan and carry out this program. These leaders are split into three subcategories that cover several areas: finances, training, and recruitment. The subcategories are in place to cover specific areas of the peer mentor program. There will be a discussion to propose this program to the CAFES academic advisors, professors, and older students who would be willing to volunteer their time to help fellow younger students. It is necessary to start with a small amount of money to help cover the starting costs of recruitment and marketing tools. To reduce costs, the authors will start with the Agricultural Communications (AGC) and Agricultural Education/Agricultural Science (AGED) majors and later on expand it to the additional majors in CAFES. A professor from OCOB currently stands as the financial advisor who has created a financial statement for their peer mentorship program. They receive money from OCOB to fund marketing tools, attire, food for meetings, etc. Success would have this program grow in CAFES and continue even after the initiating project leaders graduate in Spring 2019.

Methodology for Senior Project

Informational interviews have been conducted with four CAFES academic advisors, Cathy Bartholomew, Meagan Groom, Dianne Korth, and Kristin McCain-Bender, the OCOB peer mentorship program advisor, Katelyn O'Brian, and a graduate assistant for the program,

Elaine Lee. These professionals were interviewed to get their advice on how to implement a peer mentorship program for CAFES, and if it would be feasible. After the aforementioned interviews were conducted, meetings with OCOB students, including Epsa Sharma, involved in the program were conducted to get information on what they got out of the program, what they liked/disliked about it, and how it was structured. Some of the questions that were asked in the interviews included:

- What is the structure of the OCOB peer mentorship program?
- How do you keep the students involved accountable?
- Where does the funding for this program come from?
- Who coordinates this program?
- Are the students compensated, and if so how?

The next round of interviews were held with faculty on Cal Poly's campus. There were several discussions to gain support from academic advisors and professors of CAFES to see what worked best for the college, as well as from older students willing to volunteer their time to help out their younger peers. A small undetermined, monetary investment is necessary to kick-off this project to help cover recruiting and marketing tools. To reduce costs, the program will start with just AGC/AGED majors and then spread it out to more majors in CAFES. Once this program has taken off it will be open to students of all CAFES majors who are willing to participate.

Results

After conducting multiple interviews, the questions listed above were answered as such:

- *What is the structure of the OCOB peer mentorship program?* "I oversee a graduate assistant and multiple students leaders who are separated into three subcategories that cover finances, training, and recruitment. Each student mentor has anywhere between three to six mentees." – Katelyn O'Brian
- *How do you keep the students involved accountable?* "When the mentor and mentee are first paired together, they fill out a contract which includes their academic and personal goals which they wish to achieve during the school year. They are then required to meet at least once a month to work towards reaching these goals. Also, a quarterly meeting is conducted with myself and each student leader to do a report on the mentees progress towards their goals." -Katelyn O'Brian
- *Where does the funding for this program come from?* "OCOB is really lucky, we have a lot of wealthy alumni donors. There's some donors that are really passionate about programs that benefit struggling students, so they donate a fair amount to our programs." – Katelyn O'Brian
- *Who coordinates this program?* "Essentially I'm the main coordinator of this program alongside Elaine Le, my graduate assistant. However, the student leaders play huge role in running this program. It wouldn't work without participation from the students." – Katelyn O'Brian

Furthermore, after collecting extensive research the results of this project show a peer mentorship program is a necessity for CAFES. It would be beneficial for all students involved

and would lead to higher retention and graduation rates. There is strong support for this program from the Agriculture Leadership Society (ALS) and from the CAFES academic advisors. Megan Silcott, the advisor for ALS, reported the program will receive funding from the society until it takes off, builds credibility within CAFES, and is seen as a valuable student affairs program. It was concluded this program would be entirely volunteer based with refreshments, materials and supplies provided at the meetings for the mentors.

Implications/moving forward

While the groundwork for this peer mentorship program has been established, the greatest implication for this it to succeed is the need for a leader to drive this program forward. After meeting with the CAFES academic advisors it has been decided that a student, a graduate student, or an academic advisor must take over the project to implement it in the years to come. The advisors believe there will be a new advisor hired in the near future whose responsibilities would include the role of advising student groups. It is possible that this new advisor would be willing to take on the role as coordinator of this program. However, if this is not feasible then the next best option would be for a graduate student to head this program, identical to what the graduate assistant of OCOB's mentorship program does. Moving forward, the end goal of this program is to expand beyond a club or a single department into CAFES as a whole, allowing every student in the college access to this program and all of its benefits.

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